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REMAINDERS OF THE AMERICAN CENTURY: POST-APOCALYPTIC NOVELS IN THE AGE OF US DECLINE (2021) BY BRENT RYAN BELLAMY

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Frederic Jameson's famous aphorism about the inability to imagine the end of capitalism and the ease with which we can conceive the end of the world has become a cliché in the twenty-first century. Brent Ryan Bellamy extends this lack of imagination to nationalism in this brilliant book which posits that it is easier for Americans to imagine the end of the world than to conceive of the end of the United States' (US) hegemony over the globe, that indeed the end of the latter entails the end of the former.

Novels in the Post-Apocalyptic genre, the books argues, are not in fact about "the end of the world" as much as historical endings (1). There is an irony in the narratives in this regard, such that their protagonists live in squalor and compete with other survivors which mirrors the real world situation of those who have been forced to adjust to the demands of US capitalism and already live in survival mode. In these works, "crisis" becomes "opportunity" and the individual is more important than the community (2). They are self-fulfilling neoliberal fantasies imagining the collapse of society in order to bring back the 'American Dream' for certain men. Bellamy makes a distinction between the Post-Apocalypse as a genre of fiction and instead on the post-apocalyptic *mode*, borrowing the concept from Veronica Hollinger as a "method" or practice and not just a family resemblance of story elements, examining the "effects" of the mode instead of just the affinities of representation in the works (4). This allows for a "historical distinction" because genres change constantly and evolve over time, but "modes correspond to longer cultural periods" (6). Such investigation reveals how the work draws implicit comparisons between the worlds before and after the apocalyptic event and this allows for the modality to exceed genre with its expectations and conventions (8). The apocalyptic event of each narrative determines new social norms as it posits a never-ending crisis as the new norm in a post-hegemony world where privilege is determined by brutality and in doing so suggests that this might be the outcome of real-world catastrophe (10). These are speculations about ideological and real-world disaster.

Viewing the long twentieth century as the 'American century' posits the beginning of US hegemony as its entry into World War Two in 1941. It views the decline of this power beginning in the 1970s, which contradicts social theorists who locate US hegemony as beginning in the 1970s.

Beginning with the entry into World War II recognises the effects of the overt militarisation of American society brought about by the war, leading to the on-going state of conflict the country has experienced ever since. This hegemony is graphically represented by the proliferation of US military bases across the globe. However, this power is fragile, and as Bellamy notes in his analysis, makes America paranoid and dangerous (15). Any threat to US power is treated as apocalyptic and recent military failures only serve to demonstrate the fragility of US power (16). Perpetual war is no longer profitable. Bellamy utilises the concept of “remainders” to pose this argument because it means “the ill-fitting and the residual” simultaneously and can apply to “value, matter, and historicity” equally (18). These structures remain, but their operation has been altered by the apocalyptic event that begins or precedes the narrative, often rendering them obsolete. Some remain crucial aspects of life that protagonists use as a measure of who counts and who does not. In this way, Bellamy uses the post-apocalyptic mode to examine publishing remainders, the apocalyptic future of books in the current publishing industry if no one buys them. Bellamy addresses how many post-apocalyptic narratives imagine a world of hyper-masculine, white subjects as a remainder of social norms and how this demographic has shifted in the twenty-first century. Remainders exist diegetically as things left over from the previous world and also as literary tropes used by writers of novels and Bellamy uses them to examine conflict over the meanings of both the ‘end’ of America and survival as such.

The familiar tropes used in these narratives arise from the assumption that there are survivors of the cataclysm (31). We need heroes with which to identify. Bellamy examines early post-war Post-Apocalyptic novels that work through anxieties brought about by genocide, weapons of mass destruction, and the escalating Cold War and Civil Rights Movement. They are deeply invested in how their characters navigate the new world and their location within it. The most pervasive of the tropes inaugurated in these works are: listing the remainders of the past still extant; the forming of novel communities and enclaves; and the figure of a ‘last man’ trudging through post-apocalyptic existence as a living remainder of white male privilege. Bellamy then examines the many parts of modern life which become useless in the post-apocalypse, “reduced futures” that feature what has been lost (53). This is analogous to the experience of poor nations in our current global regime of austerity measures. World-building in Post-Apocalyptic novels occurs by way of subtraction. These removals indicate the narratives’ political valence as it defamiliarises the modern world and shows us an abnormal world as the new normal. These novels imagine an end to history as a way of understanding historical change (65). Bellamy then changes tactics to analyse the practice in book publishing called “remaindering” which removes works that are not selling from the shelves and sends them back to the publisher to be destroyed for a refund. The book notes a trend of literary authors writing Post-Apocalyptic novels in recent years in order to avoid this fate and that the genre has moved from a marginal niche audience to a more general readership, especially as Young Adult fiction. Bellamy makes a cogent argument for the paradoxical moment we find ourselves in where post-apocalyptic titles proliferate, meaning that many will be remaindered, while authors are drawn to writing such narratives due to their popularity and the threat of their work being remaindered (98).

The latter half of the book examines representative texts that show how the mode’s use has expanded and adjusted to a more inclusive society while depicting and working through the decline of American power. Such texts often set the post-apocalypse as a new frontier to conquer since the

US has always been imagined as pushing against boundaries as its destiny to manifest. In novels like *The Postman* (1985) it also means restoring the nation to something like its former glory. This entails ending the capitalist accumulation by dispossession, depicted as marauding raiders, rendering its violence as anathema to communication and the circulation of goods. But the 'saviour' in these novels tends to be a neoliberal cowboy who leverages disaster to his own benefit (118). Such novels present "a contest over the collective determination of the future" or what kind of America people we want (129). Bellamy investigates the ways that racialisation determines post-apocalyptic futures. For many such narratives, this results in overt white supremacy; if melanated people exist at all they are an oppressed minority. The apocalypse has become more diverse and equitable since work by Samuel Delaney and Octavia Butler was published, who used the mode to specifically examine the role of race in society. For African slaves and displaced or murdered indigenous people, the world has been post-apocalyptic for some time. The book examines the problem of reproductive futurity and the imperative in the post-apocalypse to have children to continue the species. He begins with a discussion of the troubled, although repressed, gender politics of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), arguing that the novel "grapples with the idea of the woman as a remainder" in a masculine world of fathers and sons (155). 'The woman,' a character never named, has a conspicuous absence in the novel's narrative, disappearing so the story of the men can begin. The imperative to reproduce is also an urge to reproduce the status quo. The novel elides the role of motherhood and posits reproduction as happening from male person to male person, a literal boys' club where women are not required (169).

The book ends with an examination of the significance of motor vehicles in these narratives, or the role of the oil industry in American economics, politics, and world dominance. It employs the term "petroculture" to denote the vast cultural and economic systems that rely on and perpetuate the use of petroleum products (172). The majority of Post-Apocalypse novels use some form of energy crisis to trigger the end of the world and their narratives are a speculation about how people will react to such scarcity, revealing how petroculture structures our daily lives. This demonstrates that oil acts as more than just commodity, but like currency, exchange value itself (179). Bellamy ends this analysis of the post-apocalyptic mode by reminding us that this is all a product of settler colonialism, which caused apocalyptic changes to those encountered by colonists, and that this means we already live in a post-apocalypse, but its "effects are uneven" geographically (207). He recommends, rather than the enclave reasoning of the characters in post-apocalypse narratives that America uses, we instead learn how to work together and make a new community for all.

This book is an important revelation of how the post-apocalyptic mode is used to speculate about the remainders of American hegemony and what these narratives reveal about our current cultural and historical conjunction. It balances depth with breadth to canvass seventy years of writing and history without being too general or abstract. Any scholar of the American hegemony would benefit from reading this work, but especially those interested in the post-apocalyptic mode.

BIONOTE

Ezekiel Crago specializes in apocalyptic media and teaches at the Early College Academy in Greeley, Colorado, US.